

1-1-2013

Radical Incrementalism: An Open Letter in Defense of the Small

Dan Etheridge

Emilie Taylor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/oz>



Part of the [Architecture Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Etheridge, Dan and Taylor, Emilie (2013) "Radical Incrementalism: An Open Letter in Defense of the Small," *Oz*: Vol. 35. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2378-5853.1512>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Oz* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

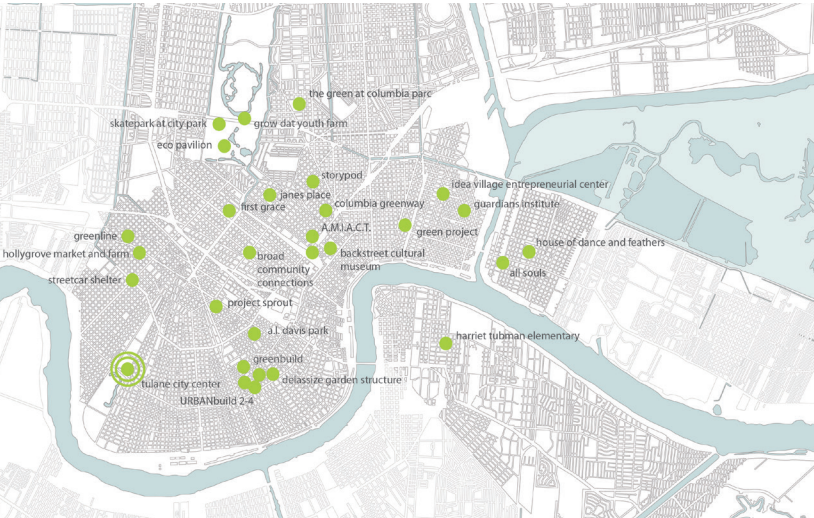
Radical Incrementalism

An Open Letter in Defense of the Small

Dan Etheridge and Emilie Taylor
Tulane City Center

The existential core of urbanism is the desire for radical change to bring all the good implied in the original utopian association of the ‘the city.’ This radical impulse stands in contrast to the necessary prudence and constraints of incremental change, which is the only way of intervening in conditions of profound complexity and entrenched power dynamics embedded in capitalist modernities.

—Edgar Pieterse, from *City Futures*



New Orleans is a 350.2 square mile parish covered by roughly 14,000 square feet of TCC projects



University student and Pyramid Wellness patient work to build an outdoor group therapy space

An Open Letter in Defense of the Small

Dear Urban Change Agent,

We know you have big ideas, we do too. You think good design can make a difference. You see the work of others in the world, folks like Rural Studio, MASS, or the Center for Urban Pedagogy and you think, my community has needs and opportunities that could be addressed by design. My community has people, neighborhoods, and issues that are underserved by traditional design services. You are not alone in thinking these things and asking questions about where and how. There is a growing network of architects, educators, graphic designers, and students who have these shared aims. They are gathering in online networks such as SEED or OAN, and in rooms as in the Public Interest Design Institute sessions. It seems like many professionals, students, and educators are rethinking our role in the world and working on models of how to engage underserved communities as designers.

You may wonder, why doesn't the public interest design cause have someone working at the scale of Robert Moses?¹ Why do the examples that exist seem to be small projects rather than entire cities, infrastructure networks, or neighborhoods? As colleagues we often sit around wondering about our movement growing, and whether in the future we will get to work on bigger, more

transformative projects. There are some cities, such as Dallas, that have seen the value of this effort and set up the Dallas CityDesign Studio to work on planning issues with the direct input and engagement of residents and stakeholders, but these examples are rare. And while this may be in the future of public interest design, we at the Tulane City Center (TCC) want to take this time to defend the small as agents of real and meaningful change.

What We Do

At the Tulane City Center, we partner with nonprofits and community groups in New Orleans to produce tangible results that are well integrated into their community context and that answer real needs defined by the involved constituents. Each of these partnerships provides opportunities for stakeholders to engage the future of our city, and for faculty and students to tackle real issues in real communities. Through this process we aim to build long-term relationships, produce thoughtful and well-executed work that is immediately useful to the community partners, and educate socially conscious and technically competent young designers.

In working with scrappy nonprofits and grass roots community groups on individual projects that they identify, our commitment to depth-over-breadth is radical. We partner with those groups that are small but whose work is powerful. They are educating high school students to be leaders, providing shelter to battered women and children, growing fresh local food

for communities with low access, creating micro-economies in neighborhoods, providing services to those in our community who have been at the mercy of mental health budget cuts, and a number of other critically needed services. These projects and their impacts are small in relationship to the city, and to the devastation left in the wake of Katrina, but they are tangible and meaningful, and their influence is deep in the lives of the stakeholders. We believe that working with these small groups can bolster the work they have started and over time, our body of work can have a radical impact.

As an example, we have recently completed a four-acre urban farm in City Park called Grow Dat. It is an organic farm and teaching campus where high school students have job opportunities and learn leadership skills through the work of growing food. In the first two years of operation, Grow Dat has gone from harvesting 1,200 pounds of food to 10,000. Of the food harvested, 60% is sold at markets to support the salaries of the high school students, while the remaining 40% is donated to local food banks and goes towards the shared harvest that the student employees are encouraged to take home and distribute with family and neighbors. The Grow Dat campus is 6,000 square feet of teaching and support spaces made from repurposed industrial products, composting toilets, and a water management strategy that does not burden on city resources. The design, while progressive and award-winning, is best considered

after one understands the program that is impacting the lives of 35 high school students each year. This is what gives meaning to our work.

Other examples of recent projects:

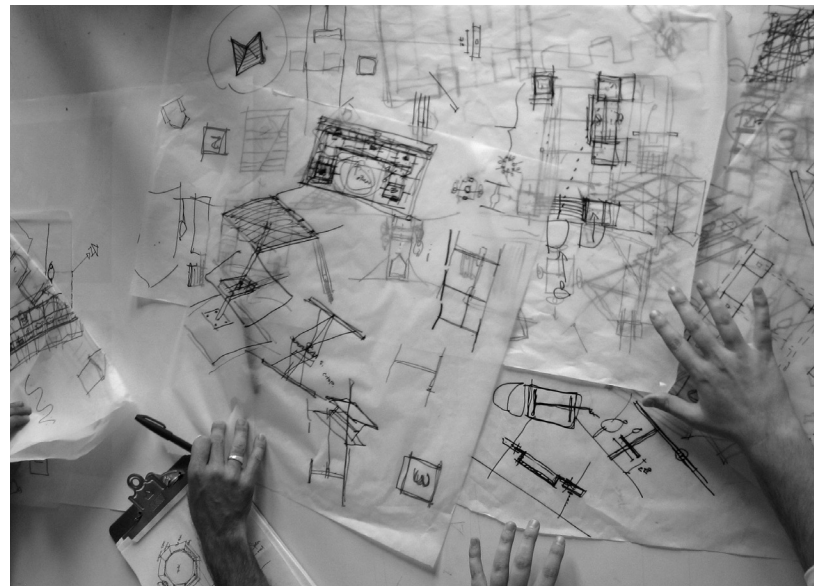
Guardians Institute is a 1,000 square-foot Mardi Gras Indian Performance space that houses the Institute's cultural programming. The Guardians use their museum as a performance space, beading space, and home base for a children's literacy program that to date has given out over 30,000 books in the New Orleans Community.

Project Ish is an addition to a battered women's shelter that was completed on a very limited budget and serves the needs of seven families at any given time. The space allows residents to have a daytime playroom, and at night provides a secure and quiet place for mothers to have yoga, knitting, and art time.

Pyramid Wellness is our most recent project. Students designed and built the exterior support spaces for a local mental health treatment facility. The project includes an outdoor dining space, group therapy spaces, a garden, bus stop, and stage for talent shows and programming, within a total budget of \$20,000. This facility serves 30 residents with severe or chronic mental illness.

How We Operate

We would love to have someone offer us a limitless budget, and say, "Oh, by the way, you don't have to worry about



any of the political or social complexity of the project." In our experience, that isn't happening anytime soon. However, we still want to change the world. So, with faith in the power of small projects, and with a team of architecture students and faculty excited to take on real and challenging design (and often design/build) projects, we have launched a yearly Request For Proposals process.² In the spring of each year we send out RFPs to the New Orleans nonprofit community. We have worked hard to make a fair and simple application process so that neighborhood groups, communities, and nonprofits in need of design services can tell us about the work they do and their project ideas.³ A jury of past community partners and local professionals read through the proposals and choose our project partners for the year. These selected projects are done at little or no cost

to the nonprofit thanks to private and corporate donations.⁴ This process has generated projects ranging from a \$5,000 public transportation advocacy project to the \$50,000 Guardians Institute performance space.

Realizing that community partners, city government, and stakeholders do not adhere to an academic schedule, we have an adaptable structure for our projects. Some are run as courses for credit during an academic semester, others are run as small projects where students work for pay. All of our projects involve a faculty lead who receives a small stipend, and a team of students to work with. The staff of the City Center facilitates project setup, funding, permitting, and takes part in project meetings to reinforce the focus of the project and the aims of all stakeholders. In the case of the Guardians Institute project there was



Pyramid Wellness

a year's worth of city planning commission meetings, lot redistribution, variances, conditional use permits, building permits, and city council approval that happened between our staff, faculty, and a small team of paid students before the fun work of a design/build semester could take place.

If you are thinking of designing something and if you dare to build that design, you will run into two major hurdles: funding, and liability. Like many of our peer community design and design/build programs, we scrape and work at finding grants and donations, and when funding does come

through, we stretch those funds and leverage our resources as far as possible. In addition to free student labor (students are earning academic credit for a project), we are able to stretch a budget like Project Ish or Guardians by pursuing donations from local companies like Dash Lumber, national companies such as Hardie, and Simpson Strong Tie, and foraging for salvaged building components. Grow Dat's open web joists, which support the outdoor classroom space, were salvaged from a construction project that was victim to Katrina, saving us nearly \$18,000 in structural steel. Liability is a different issue al-

together and is very dependent on the situation, but know that others before you have figured it out. Find an organization that is doing what you want to do and buy someone there a meal in exchange for some advice.

In our projects we have one primary aim: to be sure that what we do doesn't just look good, but that it does good. You may create the most photogenic, materially innovative, and structurally daring project in town, but if it isn't serving the community, if no one is using it and loving it as a place to dance, teach, boil crawfish, or congregate, then you have failed. In order to have

a successful project, we must train our students and ourselves to listen carefully to our community partners. It sounds like common sense, but be sure that what you are designing is in fact what is being asked for. We must understand the community partners' work, goals, and vision; so that we can collaboratively design a project that facilitates that work and increases their opportunity to reach others. There must be a continuous feedback loop during the design process and opportunity to make adjustments on site as the project takes shape. Additionally, before the project even begins we have to understand the capacity of the nonprofit or neighborhood group we are working with and make sure that there is a plan in place to use and care for the project they are requesting. We have learned through experience that lack of buy-in, or lack of the ability and understanding to care for a project (even if it is just a shade structure in a garden) could create a liability and could add to the neglect and blight of a city struggling to rid itself of those things.

So, as you go forward in your design career, please do feel empowered to propose big solutions to big problems, but also know that there is real meaning and change possible by acting small and often. Think that you can change the world, and act by doing something in your own little piece of it. And when you get the process all perfectly right let us know what you did, because public interest design is a work in progress, and we have come as far as we have because our colleagues have shared their own stories.


We look forward to working with you!



Pictured is Little Chief Kevin, of the Young Guardians of the Flame / The Guardians Institute serves as an outdoor performance space for Mardi Gras Indian events



Grow Dat's teaching campus is a series of shipping containers housing teaching and farm support spaces, and providing the structural support for large covered outdoor spaces

Project Scale	Size (footprint)	Semesters	Credit Hours	Number of Participants
xs - hollygrove 	60-80 s.f.			 4-6 students 1 faculty/staff
s - project ish 	400 s.f.			 12-15 students 1 faculty/staff
m - pyramid 	800 s.f.			 23 students 2 faculty/staff
l - guardians 	1000 s.f.			 18 students 3 faculty/staff
xl - grow dat 	6000 s.f.			 40-45 students 4 faculty/staff

Tulane City Center university design build project models

- Notes**
1. In the book *Small Scale Big Change; New Architectures of Social Engagement* (by Adres Lepik, NoMA, New York, 2010) Barry Bergdoll writes an introduction that traces many of the motivations of current public interest designers back to the larger ethical aims of modernist engaged movements in architecture.
 2. Based on the Firebelly RFP process. Firebelly is a for profit graphic design company in Chicago which does a few pro-bono projects each year through a Request for Proposals process.
 3. Our full request for proposals packet is available online at our website: www.tulane-citycenter.org
 4. A majority of the Request for Proposals projects have been funded by a generous gift from Johnson Controls Inc. While only two or three projects per year are chosen and funded through this open call process, we typically take on a few more of the submitted projects through other funding sources. Several of our current projects were found through this process and are being funded through Surdna, and other private anonymous donations.



Project Ish, an addition to a battered women's shelter